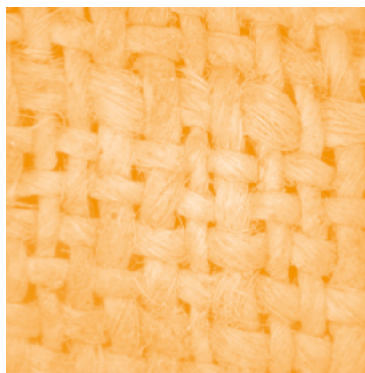


Textile material from Old Dongola: preliminary observations on trade and sartorial practices in the Ottoman period



Abstract: The textiles presented in this paper come from the so-called House of the Mekk, which—judging by its intricate plan and size—was one of the most important compounds on the Old Dongola citadel during the Funj period (16th–18th centuries). The typology of the textiles presented is representative of an urban settlement, and two case studies, piece-dyed blue cottons and fabrics decorated with plaid-effect pattern in white and blue, are discussed in greater detail. The textile analysis is complemented by an assessment of various written sources (court registers, traveler's accounts), which can produce information about trade routes and goods, and also offer a preliminary picture of the sartorial practices of the elite in Old Dongola during the Ottoman period.

Keywords: Dongola, blue-dyed cotton, plaid-effect pattern, trade, sartorial practices

Specific environmental conditions of the Middle Nile Valley offer optimal preservation for organic material. Textiles retrieved from archaeological exploration, no matter how fragmentary, provide always substantial information about the resources, technology, and society in which they were produced (Andersson Strand et al. 2010). Such data is particularly valuable in contexts in which written sources are rather scarce.

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Archaeological research in Sudan, frequently the outcome of salvage programs necessitated by dam construction projects, has been concentrated mostly in Nubia with numerous textiles coming from both settlements and burials (Bergman 1975; Mayer Thurman and Williams 1979; Adams 1996; 2001; 2002; 2003; Adams and Adams 1998; 2010; Adams et al. 1999). More recently, excavations conducted in the Fourth Cataract region (also within the framework of a dam-related salvage program) have demonstrated the preservation of textiles also in this area (Carpio and Guillen 2005; Chłodnicki 2007; Osypiński

2007; 2010; Longa 2010; 2012; 2014; Petrick 2012; Heikel and Patolla 2012; Woźniak, in preparation). Old Dongola, the capital city of the kingdom of Makuria, is no exception. Fabrics were found previously by a Polish mission from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology University of Warsaw (Godlewski, Mahler, and Czaja-Szewczak 2012; Czaja 2018), as well as more recently by the UMMA Project, which is set to explore the late medieval Funj-related (16th–18th centuries) layers on the citadel in Dongola. This paper presents part of the textiles excavated in the 2018–2019 and 2019–2020 seasons.

PROVENANCE

The textile fragments documented during a short study visit to Old Dongola in February 2020 counted 274 in total and of these 238 were fragments of woven fabrics. The other items were raw fibers (wool, cotton), spun threads, occasionally raveled yarns (mainly from piece blue-dyed fabric), various cords, strings, fringes, a few fragments of non-woven textiles (felt, braids) and what could well be a button. For each group of textiles recovered from a context, the fragments were inventoried by type, and measurements were taken for the biggest fragments.¹ The assemblage considered here represents approximately 20% of the total number of textiles (visual evaluation) recovered during the first two seasons of the UMMA Project. It is too early to

draw general conclusions about textile production and cloth consumption in Old Dongola during the Ottoman period based on such a small data sample, but some preliminary observations can be made already at this stage of the research.

The focus of these observations are textiles from contexts related to the so-called House of the Mekki and its vicinity. “Mekki” was a royal title during the post-medieval period, worn by Funj kings, as well as by rulers of smaller territories, such as Dongola, after it ceased to be the capital of the kingdom of Makuria. Early explorers dubbed the large and intricately planned complex the House of the Mekki, but the “royal” nature of the building is uncertain. It evidently belonged to a wealthy owner, as the excavations in the 2019–2020 season

¹ Not every single fragment was registered. Fragments of the same fabric were all counted, except in rare instances when they were too tiny and numerous; then they were estimated by the surface they covered, a basic unit being an A4 sheet paper. The information was reported in the “measurements” column, but registered as one item as all of the fragments came from one fabric.

highlighted, but the evidence was insufficient for identifying this individual with the Mekki of Dongola (M. Wyżgoł, personal communication, 2020).

The textiles from the House of the Mekki were found in two adjacent but not interconnected rooms, 113 and 128 [Fig. 1]. Room 113 was probably on the ground floor of a two-story building. Its original function cannot be determined at present, but at some stage it was certainly used for food preparation and later for rubbish disposal. A total of 22 textile fragments was found in the refuse layer. As for room 128, also on the ground floor it was initially used as living quarters, then as a workspace for household activities, and finally as a dump. Here also the textiles, a total number of 96 fragments, came from the rubbish, but in terms of content, the two

rubbish depositions were different: the waste from room 113 consisted mainly of ash, which is typical of cooking activities, whereas that in Room 128 was more diverse (M. Wyżgoł, personal communication, 2020). As for the size of the textile fragments, both assemblages contained small, medium, and larger pieces. Density was gauged by counting the number of warps and wefts in 1 cm² of the fabric. Interestingly, the upper stories of the building were apparently inhabited even as the ground-floor rooms were filled with rubbish, indicating that the waste could have come from the neighborhood as well as from the residents of the house.

The presence of textile fragments in refuse contexts is common in settlements. Fabrics were costly items, reused repeatedly long after they were no longer useful for

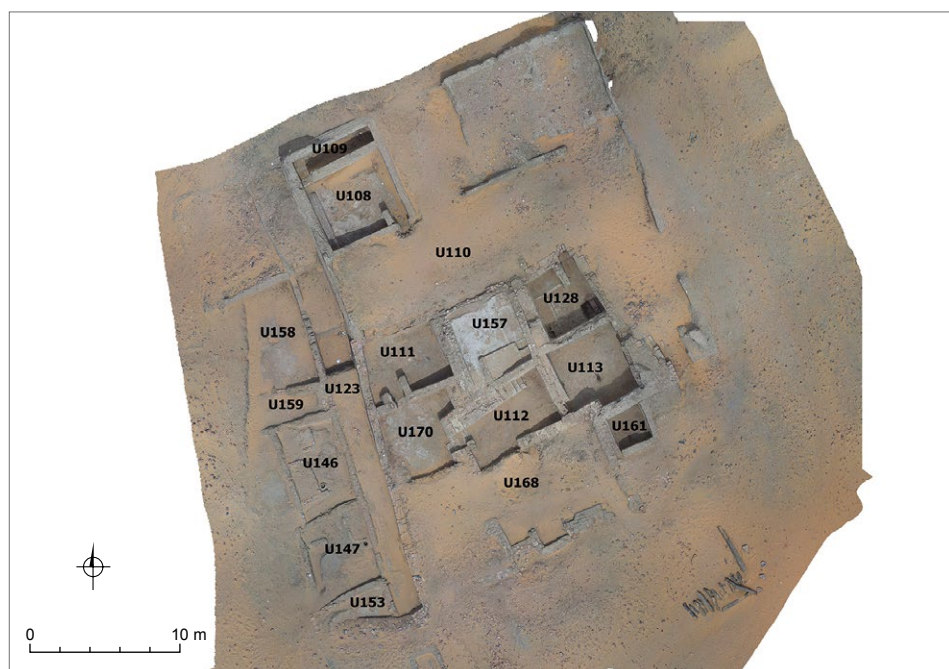


Fig. 1. Plan of the so-called House of the Mekki in Old Dongola; rooms 113 and 128 at right (UMMA Project (ERC), PCMA UW | orthophoto A. Chlebowski)

their original purpose. Larger fragments were redone into children's clothes or used for patching other garments. Smaller pieces, especially of valuable textiles, could be adapted into decorative panels on hats, for example, or used to embellish hems. Small, doll-size dresses, clumsily sewn, present in the textile material from Qasr Ibrim were

interpreted by Elizabeth Crowfoot and Nettie K. Adams as children's training pieces (Alexander and Adams 2018: 157). These small models were made of scraps or, most probably, of reused textiles. Ultimately, a worn and discarded fabric ended up as rags, toilet paper, or even filler for masonry walls (Alexander and Adams 2018: 151).

TEXTILE ANALYSIS

The typology of the textiles from the House of Mekk follows the categories employed in textile analysis, namely, fabric structure (that is, identification of the fiber), twisting direction of the yarn, fabric density and type of weave.² Consequently, textiles are grouped by fibers (in this case, wool, cotton, linen,

silk, *Fig. 3*) and are sub-divided into two groups depending on the spinning direction of the yarns: S or Z [*Fig. 4*].³ Evaluation of textile density serves to assess fabric quality [*Fig. 2*].

Textile examination also provides information on any visible embellishment processes, such as dyeing, which can be

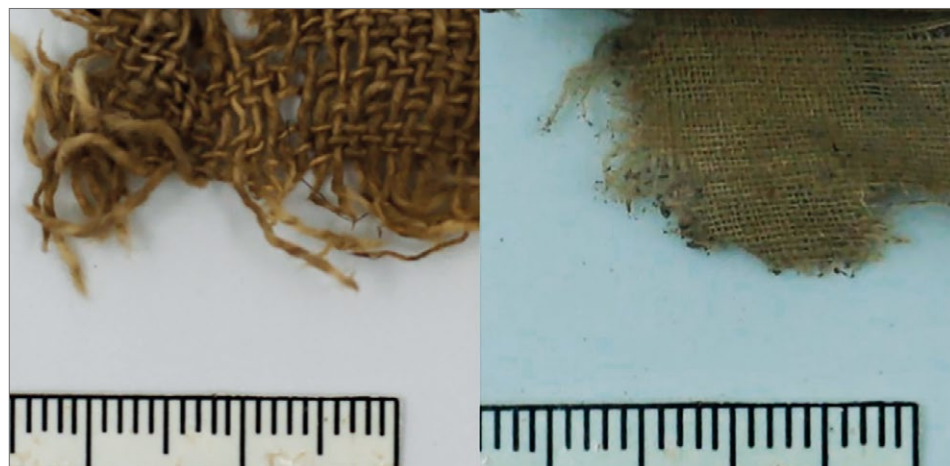


Fig. 2. Two cotton textiles of different densities: 7 warps x 9 wefts/cm² (left) and 24 warps x 25 wefts/cm² (right) (UMMA Project (ERC), PCMA UW | photo M. Drab)

- 2 For non-specialists, weave is the way warps and wefts intercross. Basic weaves are tabby, twill, and satin. Except for specific complex weaves, it is not possible to determine the loom used for weaving a fabric. Warp-weighted looms are attested in Sudan antiquity, but the absence of loom-weights in medieval contexts suggest a two-beam loom instead, which is consistent with descriptions left by Johann Ludwig Burckhardt (1819: 253).
- 3 If the number of mixed warps and/or wefts spun in S and Z direction increases significantly in further studies of this assemblage, then a third sub-group labelled S/Z will be introduced.



Fig. 3. Fabric structure in microscopic images: top left, cotton; top right, wool; bottom left, linen; and bottom right, silk (right) (PCMA UW | Dinolite photograph M.M. Woźniak)



Fig. 4. Cotton fibers twisted in S direction (left) and in Z direction (right) (PCMA UW | Dinolite photograph M.M. Woźniak)

applied to raw fibers before spinning, spun threads (to be used as warps and/or wefts to create a woven decorative pattern), or complete woven pieces of fabric, which are dyed in their entirety. From time to time one can also observe traces of tailoring and/or sewing. Weaving is in itself a time-consuming activity, requiring careful planning at each stage. Any additional embellishment and/or transformation increases the value of a given piece of textile. Hence, such traces can be considered as indicators of fabric value.

An exemplary study of similar material, which the author has drawn on extensively both for content, comparanda and methods of presentation, is the recent publication of Ottoman textiles from Qasr Ibrim (Nettie K. Adams, in Alexander and Adams 2018). All 53,077 fragments from 793 provenances in the Ottoman layers were inventoried,⁴ and despite rigors of space (“a complete report on the entire corpus of textiles from the Ottoman period will require a separate monograph”, Alexander and Adams 2018: 151), the chapter on the textiles offers a detailed overview of the fabric types, their ratio in the assemblage, and, when possible, descriptions of the kind of garments identified.

The assemblages from the two rooms were considered separately. The set from room 113 contained only cotton fragments

and one piece of wool fabric [Fig. 5 top]. All the fabrics represent a tabby weave, which is the simplest weave where each weft passes over one and under one warp. The cotton material can be divided into cottons made of S-spun yarns (1/3) and cottons made of Z-spun yarns (2/3). Among the cottons with Z-spun yarns, about 30% are piece-dyed in blue. Due to the very long tradition of counterclockwise spinning in Sudan, fabrics woven with S-spun yarns are considered to be local products, while textiles woven with Z-spun yarns are most probably imports (see discussion in Bouchaud, Yvanez, and Wild 2019: 30–36). Fabric density (comprised between 10 and 14 yarns/cm for both warp and weft) indicates medium-quality, most probably used for clothes. About 40% of the pieces had tailoring/sewing traces [see Fig. 5 center and bottom].

The set from room 128 presents similar repartition, the assemblage being dominated by cotton tabbies [Fig. 6 top]. Fabrics woven with Z-spun threads are more numerous than those woven with S-spun threads. Fragments of both show traces of sewing or tailoring. Also, more than half of the Z-spun cottons are dyed blue. One of the peculiarities of the group is the presence of pieces decorated with a plaid effect⁵ in white and blue.⁶ Most of the fabrics are medium-

4 Of these, 1322 pieces were selected as a reference base, numbered and catalogue; they were divided between the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, the British Museum in London and the Bolton Museum in Manchester (Alexander and Adams 2018: 151).

5 Regarding the terminology, the author follows the CIETA system, where the term “chequered” is applied to a pattern created in the fabric’s structure by the weaving, while “plaid-effect” is preferred to describe a pattern created by color, that is, the setting of the colored warps on the loom and the selection of color wefts during the weaving process.

6 “White” is used to describe the general effect produced by the pattern; the actual shade of the cotton undyed threads varies from pale beige to golden.

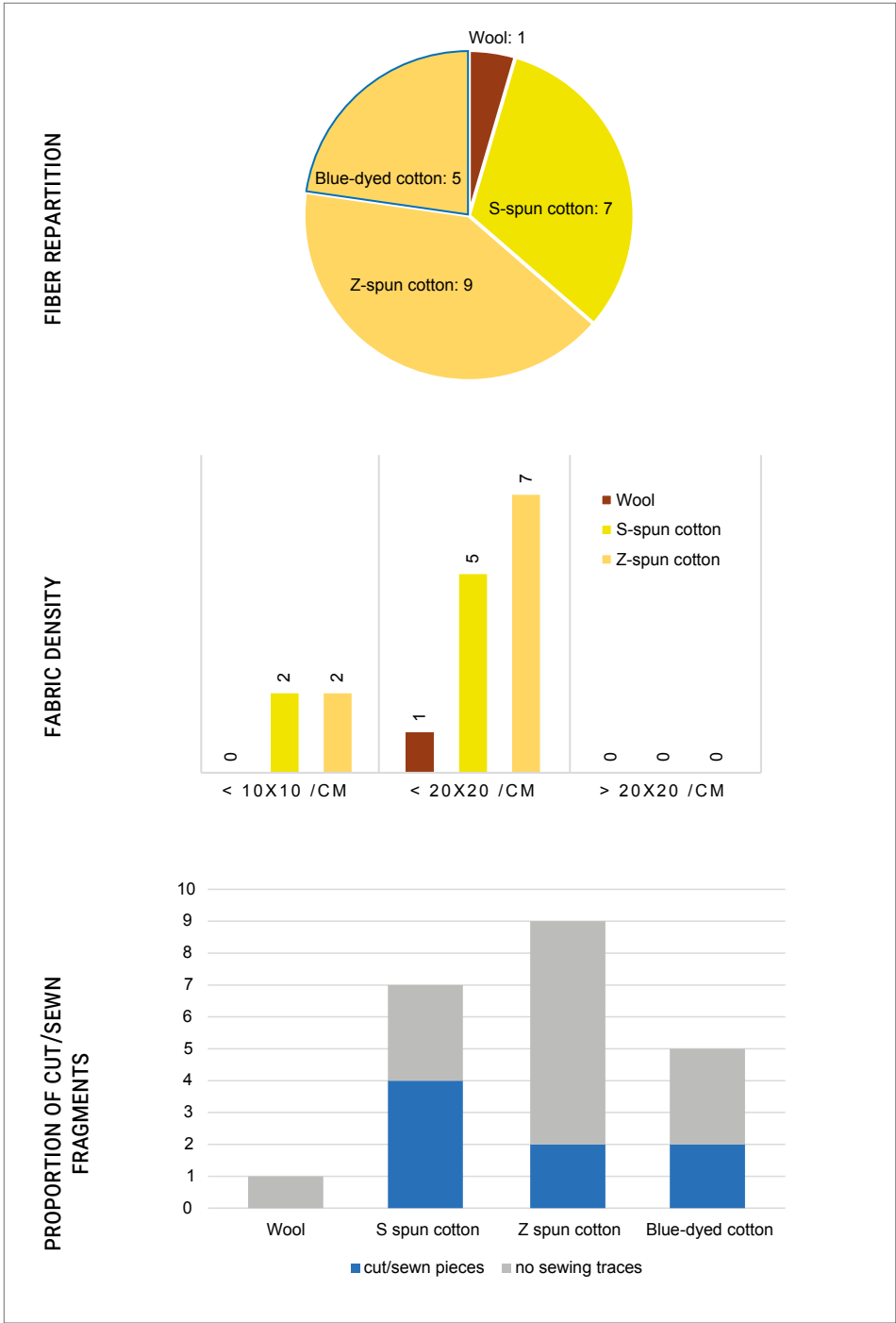


Fig. 5. Textile assemblage from Room 113: top, fiber repartition; center, fabric density; and bottom, proportion of sewn textiles

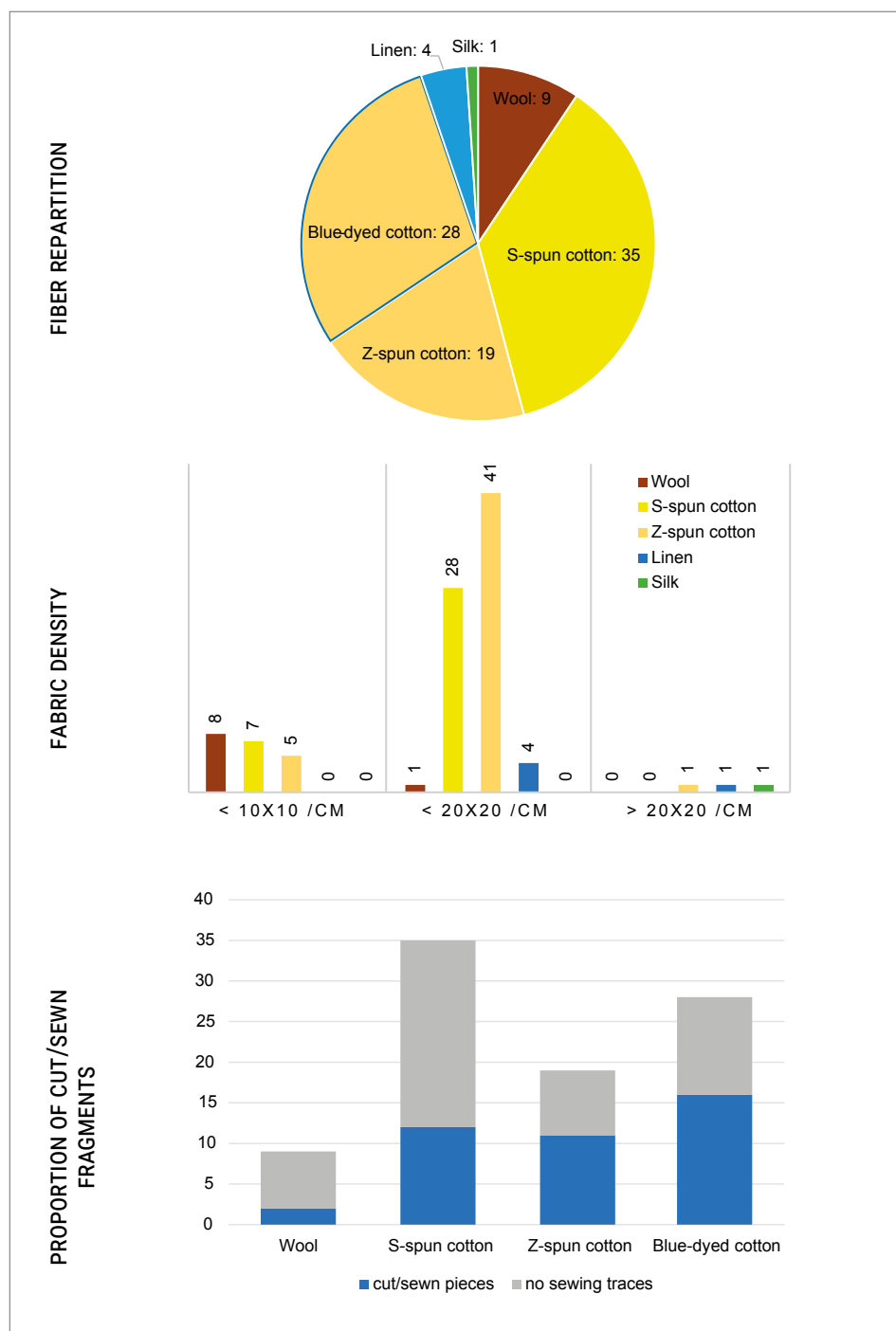


Fig. 6. Textile assemblage from Room 128: top, fiber repartition; center, fabric density; and bottom, proportion of sewn textiles

quality pieces [Fig. 6 center]. Regarding the woolen fragments, which are woven exclusively with S-spun yarns, they appear to be tabbies of lesser quality with a density falling under $10 \times 10 / \text{cm}^2$. Another interesting fact for the assemblage in room 128 is the presence of rare fibers, such as linen and silk. The four linen fragments are all tabbies woven from Z-spun yarns. Their density varies from medium- to fine-quality cloth.

A number of fragments shows sewing traces [Fig. 6 bottom]. A piece sewn from two fragments preserves a seam and a short fringe (Lp 198). The use of a Zs cotton yarn demonstrates that the two panels were sewn if not by an inhabitant of Dongola, then at least by a person using locally spun cotton thread. Another fragment of good-quality linen fabric bears stitching holes created by a yarn that has disintegrated completely (Lp 209). Finally, a small linen piece shows a simple plaid-effect decoration in blue on white ground (Lp 224). The original function of the linen pieces was most probably clothing as well.

As for the small silk fragment, it is composed of a bundle of threads in golden (undyed), blue and red shades. An interpretation of the context, in which it was found, suggests the con-

tent of an upper-story chamber that had fallen into the ground-floor room when the floor collapsed. The fact that all the threads are undulated proves that they unraveled from a woven piece: a closer observation of the threads under a microscope shows deeper and lighter undulations on different threads. Some threads present sections without undulation, which may point to their use as floating threads, but in the absence of the weave, this cannot be proved. Some yarns bear also fragments of a metal thread, possibly silver, wound around them; other yarns bear dark traces, which could be oxidation residues due to the contact of the thread with a metal. Even if it is not possible to reconstruct the fabric's original structure, the presence of metal threads with a silk core and the identification of some floating threads are technical elements that reveal the special value of the original textile. As for the bundle itself, it is more probable that the unraveled bright silk threads were stocked in order to be re-spun and used probably as sewing thread for embroidering or hemming a garment (Crowfoot 1931: 12; Alexander and Adams 2018: 155), rather than to be used for reweaving, since they were insufficient for the latter purpose.

CASE STUDIES

Archaeological evidence shows that wool is generally the prevalent fiber in towns and villages in Nubia (Bergman 1975; Adams and Adams 1998). When studying textiles in the Nubian context, one should keep in mind this relative "ranking" of the fibers in which the most

common and accessible product is wool. While cotton was cultivated in Sudan since the Meroitic period, its production needed an important and well-organized working force, which was often controlled by central authorities (Yvanez and Woźniak 2019: 39–45).

Furthermore, in terms of productivity, wool is much more convenient to obtain, as the quantity of wool given by a sheep surpasses by far the quantity of fiber produced by a cotton tree.⁷ In areas with reduced arable land, parcels were then mostly used for food crops and the local sheep flock usually provided the textile fiber for domestic needs (garments, utilitarian, and furnishing textiles). The larger number of cotton textiles in the assemblages from the so-called House of the Mekk can be considered to represent an urban setting, with a wealthier population that had access to trade products that were imported, and not locally produced.⁸ The presence of both local and imported textiles points to a local production of cotton cloth, which was strongly supplemented by traded fabrics (the proportion observed in the assemblages is 1/3 local for 2/3 imported). Among the textiles imported for the Sudanese market, we would like to focus on blue-dyed cotton fabrics and textiles decorated with a plaid effect in blue and white.

BLUE-DYED COTTONS

Cotton fabrics woven from Z-spun yarns and dyed blue in one piece⁹ appear in consistent numbers across many assemblages found at Old Dongola. Their dark blue color is rather well preserved, usually on the whole fragment. In some cases, the textiles show paler shadows of blue or green [Fig. 7], but when a hem is preserved, the bright blue is often visible inside. The density is that of medium-quality cloth. Numerous pieces show traces of sewing; among the fragments examined this season, some appear to have been used as panels on tailored tunics [Fig. 8]. Some pieces bear traces of repair in the form of patches or thick sewing. In most of the tailored textiles, hems and seams are sewn in a very thin running stitch. In the cases where it can be observed, the sewing thread is a blue Z-spun cotton yarn. The use of an S-spun cotton thread, usually undyed, is attested for repairs and reuse of the original textile for another purpose [Fig. 9]. In conclusion, the archaeological evidence suggests that not only untailored pieces of cloth taken off the loom were available on the market, but also possibly tailored clothes.

- 7 Discussion during "Cotton in the Old World conference" at the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris in May 2017. Internet data give an average of 60–80 g per cotton tree and an average of 1.8 to 2.2 kg per sheep. These numbers must be taken with extreme caution as the cotton species grown in medieval Sudan was different from the cotton species grown today for the cotton industry, which originates from the Americas; similarly, sheep in Sudan were short-haired and cannot be compared with other breeds of sheep, which were raised specifically for wool. However, even considering all these caveats, the quantity of fiber produced by a cotton tree is still smaller than the quantity of wool produced by a single short-haired sheep bred in Sudan.
- 8 Judging from the presence of cotton textiles woven from S-spun threads in all the assemblages, the inhabitants of Old Dongola appear to have cultivated large plots of land, undoubtedly in the Letti Basin, a part of which was used for cotton production. For the cotton cultivation system along food crops, see Bouchaud, Yvanez, and Wild 2019.
- 9 A closer examination of the textile shows that the dye did not penetrate the threads at the crossing point between warp and weft.

As for the provenance of blue-dyed cottons, some Egyptian written sources suggest India as a possible place of their production. These documents are copies of 16th-century commercial contracts kept in the archives of the religious courts in Cairo (Walz 1979). They record the activity of several members of the al-Tahtawi family, who lived in Upper Egypt and were merchants involved in the trade with Sudan. Terence Walz studied a dozen such contracts written between 1563 and 1612, in which Cairo merchants acting as investors partnered with *gallaba*, traveling merchants who “transported goods between Egypt and the [African] interior either on their account or on that of an associate” (Walz 1979: 216). Many of the *gallaba* seem to be members of Arab tribes, “located on the periphery of Upper Egypt”. Both par-

ties invested common capital to purchase goods in Egypt and sell them in Sudan in exchange for slaves, camels, feathers, or gold (Walz 1979: 222). It appears that “goods invested in partnerships were, first and foremost, textiles of various sorts which proved or were believed marketable in the Sudan” (Walz 1979: 224). Among the textiles mentioned in these contracts, Walz lists the following categories:

- *qumash*, general term used to describe cotton cloths (includes fabrics produced in the Egyptian Delta, Syria, Palestine, and India)
- *kandaki*, describes coarse cotton textiles (possibly imported from India)
- *fazari*, unidentified
- *muzaffar*, a kind of luxurious fabric destined for royalty(?)
- *masqari*, unidentified.



Fig. 7. Monochrome blue-dyed cottons from Old Dongola (Lp 160) (UMMA Project (ERC), PCMA UW | photo M. Drab).

Among these types, the *kandaki* is of particular interest for our study as it is often described as “dyed blue”. Walz cites local sources to indicate Broach (modern Bharuch, in Gujarat province) as the place where this textile was woven at the beginning of the 17th century. Interestingly, in the early 19th century, a guild of “teinturiers de toile dite Dandaki [sic] au Caire” was

identified by historian André Raymond (Raymond 1957, quoted in Walz 1979: 224–225, Note 6). Assuming it is indeed *kandaki* fabric referred to here, it is possible that some *kandaki* cloth was imported undyed and then dyed blue in Cairo. Although the dyeing process increased undoubtedly the value of this type of textile, it was still relatively cheap due to the coarseness of the



Fig. 8. Fragment assembled from two panels (Lp 243) (UMMA Project (ERC), PCMA UW | photo M. Drab)



Fig. 9. Secondary sewing with an undyed cotton thread made of two S-spun yarns plied in Z direction (UMMA Project (ERC), PCMA UW | photo M. Drab)

yarns. Of the three contracts edited and translated in full by Walz, *kandaki* appears in two: first, in an agreement from 26 November 1563, in which the parties plan to acquire “5 bundles of blue Kandaki cloth”; secondly in another contract from 7 July 1567, in which the partners declare they purchased “35 bundles of Kandaki cloth”. The Arabic word used to describe the bundle (or bale) of textiles is *kurja*, which Walz relates to *carga*, a medieval weight unit used in Europe, and equivalent to 130–180 kgs or, to a camel’s load.¹⁰

In the first contract, the total invested money amounted to 175 dinars, and it corresponded to the price of 500 pieces of Mahalla cloth (produced in the Egyptian Delta), five bundles (= 5 camel’s load or 650–900 kgs) of blue *kandaki*, two bundles of unbleached *hijazi* cloth and various articles, such as chains, tin pieces, scents and files. Curiously, the Mahalla cotton fabrics were bought in *thawb*, known to be a rectangular pieces of textile the dimension of which allowed to cut a garment from it, or, by extension, a garment (dress, tunic) cut in a textile of similar dimensions (Dozy 1845: 21–23, Note 1).¹¹ The other two types of fabrics in the document, *kandaki* and *hijazi*, were bought by weight. This distinction is certainly related to the value of the textiles: we can hypothesise that the price for more valuable fabrics was fixed per piece, while the cheaper ones were sold in gross (by weight) by bales. However, it is difficult to estimate here the exact sum

invested by the merchants for acquiring the bales of *kandaki* alone. In the second contract, 180 dinars were spent to acquire almost exclusively *kandaki* (35 bundles = 4.5–6 t.) and two camels.¹² The lack of any color adjective indicates that the cotton fabric was most probably undyed.

As already observed by Nettie Adams in the material from Qasr Ibrim, both blue-dyed and undyed cotton tabbies woven from Z-spun yarns decline in both quality of yarns and density (low, medium and fine), which confirms that the blue-dyed tabbies are the same type of cloth as the undyed ones (Adams 1996: 161; Alexander and Adams 2018: 154). When combined with the written evidence, it is very tempting to identify the cottons in our assemblages, especially the blue-dyed ones, with the *kandaki* cloth. There are plans to test this hypothesis via strontium isotope analyses, provided that access is granted by the Sudanese authorities.

TEXTILES WITH PLAID-EFFECT PATTERN IN BLUE AND WHITE

This category is much less numerous than the previous one: only 11 pieces recorded from the site so far. Most are cottons of medium quality, one is of low quality, and another of fine quality [Fig. 10]. One cotton tabby (Lp 195) has cotton (blue) and silk (red, ecru) warps; one piece is a linen (Lp 224). Two pieces have the plaid-effect pattern in blue and white enhanced with red threads (Lp 195 and Lp 122).

10 Estimated at 300–400 lbs; for example, a camel’s load is “from six to seven hundred pounds English” (Burckhardt 1819: 120).

11 In modern-day Sudan, the *thawb* is still used by women as a mantle to wrap around their body and head.

12 The issue of the cost of a camel is under debate.

The pieces, which are middle- and large-sized, were all found in the so-called House of the Mek (Room 128) and in the adjacent street (Unit 123) (two small fragments, 1.5 to 2 cm in size, came from other sectors). One is entitled to link these highly valuable textiles with the wealthy residents of the house. Indeed, 18th-century written sources speak of the Nubian elite being the exclusive users of plaid-effect patterned textiles. For example, Teodoro Krump, a Franciscan priest from Germany who was part of a mission to Sennar between 1700 and 1702, in his book published in 1710, writes about the clothing habits of the inhabitants of Nubia who wore from everyday leather or cotton loincloth to winter-time woolen mantle. When it comes to the elites, Krump adds:

“As for the clothing of the nobility, they wear a long blue shirt that reaches to the feet, which may or may not have sleeves that come down to the hands. No less common is a **piece of blue and white striped material (cotton, or cotton and silk, or even pure silk)**, which is not unlike a bed sheet in length. **They use this in place of a cloak, wrapping it two or three times around the waist as a sash, or over the hips and shoulders, and so they go about**” (Krump 1710: 224).¹³

Krump depicts the costume worn by the various dignitaries he met during his journey, such as a son of a prince or a “small king” of villages. Each of them

wears among other elements a piece of blue and white striped cloth:

“On the twelfth [of January 1701] a son of the prince, to whom we had given two handfuls of wool and a little coffee, paid us a visit. He was dressed like a Barbarian [=Nubian], and his clothing consisted of the following pieces, namely: a blue shirt wrapped around with a white and blue embroidered sheet in place of a cloak, a long sabre in his hand, ...” (Krump 1710: 230).¹⁴

“Today [22/01/1701] along the way we met the small king or patron of all these villages. He rode elegantly on a fine Arabian horse, his tobacco-pipe in his mouth, and accompanied by four slaves on foot and four mounted soldiers. As for his clothing, he wore a Nubian linen shirt without sleeves, from which one could have boiled several quarters of fat. His loins were bound about with a blue and white striped cotton sash several ells long” (Krump 1710: 233).

Some of the plaid-effect textiles match quite well with these descriptions: while most of their surface appears to have been decorated with uneven plaid-effect where larger stripes were more visible than the thin bands, as on piece Lp 215; other fragments preserve larger decorative bands which were most probably located on the fabric borders. Similar textiles decorated in blue and white appear in small numbers in assemblages dating to the Late and Terminal Chris-

13 All quotations from Krump 1710 after the English translation Spaulding 1974.

14 A decline in the quality of the textiles produced in Egypt from the end of the 17th to the end of the 18th century, possibly as a response to more competitive European textiles, may explain the production of lower quality decorated textiles, which became then more accessible also for the Sudanese market. See Raymond 1973: Chapter 6 § 46. Such a “downscaling” process to respond to the market’s increasing demand is also described in Jacoby 2004: 216–217.



Lp 103



Lp 224



Lp 122



Lp 195



Fig. 10 (and opposite page). Textile fragments decorated with plaid-effect pattern: cottons (Lp 103, 122, 197, 215), linen (Lp 224) and cotton and silk (Lp 195) (UMMA Project (ERC), PCMA UW | photo M. Drab)

tian periods at Qasr Ibrim (Adams 1996: 161–163); their presence increases notably in the Ottoman Period but nothing is said so far about their provenance on the site (Alexander and Adams 2018: 154). We do not know if these textiles were more popular and accessible to the common inhabitants of Qasr Ibrim¹⁵ or if they

were still mainly worn by the city's notables. Given the present advancement of research, it is too early to evaluate the proportion of the plaid-effect textiles in the Dongolese assemblages, and therefore, remarks about their concentration in the area of the so-called House of the Mekk are preliminary.

DISCUSSION

Despite the limited number of textiles examined this season, the various categories of fabrics identified shed light on sartorial practices in Old Dongola during the Ottoman period. The preponderance of cotton fabrics at the expense of wools in the material on site suggests an urban environment, the inhabitants of which had access to and a taste for imported textiles. The assemblages from the refuse layers of rooms 113 and 128 both contained an important number of blue-dyed cotton tabbies, of which about 40% had hems, seams, or other sewing traces. These features suggest that these textiles were initially made and used as garments.

At least judging from the finds uncovered thus far, the blue fragments are concentrated mostly in the area of the said two rooms, while being almost absent in other contexts. While dark blue garments are a familiar feature of the Egyptian visual landscape of the 19th century (Burckhardt 1819: 8), their presence in Nubia is more difficult to document. We know, for example that cotton is almost absent at Qasr Ibrim before the 14th century; however, it increases

to 5.5% of the total textile output in Late Christian Period 2 (AD 1300–1400) and to 8% in the Terminal Christian Period (AD 1400–1500) (Adams 1996: 161). Although researchers do not indicate it specifically, the proportion of cotton textiles appears to have increased further in the Ottoman Period (Alexander and Adams 2018: 154). Once again, as we have no information about the exact provenance of the Qasr Ibrim cottons, it is difficult to link them to specific areas in the city. In this situation, written sources can help to estimate the popularity of blue textiles in Nubian society of the Ottoman period. If we rely on Krump's depictions of Nubians in 1701, it appears that most people wore leather garments (*rahat* for women, apron for men) or coarse cotton wraps. This modest outfit was sometimes completed in wintertime with brown woolen mantles made of a rectangular piece of cloth wrapped around the body. Blue clothes are mentioned as well, but they are limited to tailored blue shirts, and appear only in descriptions of noblemen's costumes. The blue shirts, almost certainly tailored in cotton fabric,

15 See the description of Nubians dressed in blue shirts in Cairo by Thévenot (1622?), cited by Żurawski 2001: 94–95.

seem to have been almost always worn in combination with a rectangular piece of striped white and blue textile, used as a sash or as a cloak (Krump 1710: 224, 230–233; after Spaulding 1974). Some of the dignitaries met by Krump, possibly the most wealthy and important, wore a white robe over their blue shirt. Two times, the blue shirt is qualified by the author as “Nubian” and it seems from the context that this type had no sleeves. Travelling in Lower Nubia a century later, Burckhardt observed that blue was still worn by the wealthier classes, while common people were dressed in a “linen[20] shirt only” or in “the woolen cloak of the peasants of Upper Egypt” (Burckhardt 1819: 141). Therefore, it is possible to conclude with some certainty that until the end of the Ottoman period, blue garments were the prerogative of the elite and the wealthier inhabitants of Nubia. Consequently, the presence of blue cotton fabrics in the House of Mekk at Old Dongola sustains the initial interpretation of the dwelling as the home of an important personage.

Seeing that blue garments are assigned special value, one is entitled to ask whether blue was a color of some importance in Nubian society? Blue cloth is known to have been traded on the Sudanese market, but there is no way to tell whether it was imported because it was available in Cairo and judged attractive for sale by Egyptian merchants or imported on-demand for Sudanese customers. The first hypothesis does not exclude the second, but this kind of speculation does not lead anywhere. Material evidence from Nubia demonstrates that blue-colored

costumes were popular among the elite during antiquity (Yvanez 2018: 87–90) and that objects with apotropaic function were often colored blue. During the Christian period, the importance of blue is more difficult to assess, even though magical amulets with apotropaic function remain a vivid tradition. It would appear, however, that the written sign was perceived as more performative than the use of a specific color. Even so, some data could attest to the apotropaic function of blue in daily life practices. The inhabitants of Qasr Ibrim, for example, often used blue-checkered linen fragments to adorn “the neck area of the garments, especially those of children” (Alexander and Adams 2018: 154). Nubian women also wrapped their necks and arms with blue cords and their woolen mantles were decorated with blue wool (Krump 1710: 224). There exists archaeological evidence for the latter aspect (Lp 34, 70, 141, 146, 171, 256). Both Poncet and Krump list blue-dyed wool as a currency used in Nubia for bargaining (Poncet 1709: 10; Krump 1710: 223), which hints to the fact that blue-dyed fabrics were desirable products on the local market. While wealthier people could afford garments dyed entirely in blue, the lower classes may have acquired limited quantities of blue fabric to adorn their clothing and jewellery. Such a predilection for blue, while many other shades were available on the Egyptian market, was certainly not accidental, but further research is needed to determine whether blue was just a fashionable color or it carried a peculiar meaning for the Nubian people.

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